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Recommended Citation

Vance, Makenzie, "Questioning Our Questions" (2020). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 59.

https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor/59

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Utah State University

Questioning Our Questions

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English 4910

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16 April 2020

Abstract

A tutor's effectiveness relies heavily on the questions they ask. Being able to properly address a student's concerns is almost exclusively done through effective questioning. Looking into how folklorists interview provides a wealth of tactics commonly used to gather information from informants. Transitioning these tactics into tutoring can help tutors ask questions more intentionally.

Keywords: Questions, Asking Questions, Interview, Open-Ended Questions, Fact-Based Questions, Follow-Up Questions, Grand Tour Questions, Details Through Questions, Experience Questions, Native-Like Questions, Leading Questions, Loaded Questions

Questioning Our Questions

“Questions are probably the most important thing that we do. What the writing center stands for is not being in a position of authority, it’s helping the student find answers themselves.” -Marissa Devey, USU Writing Tutor

A tutor’s effectiveness relies heavily on the questions they ask. Being able to properly address a student’s concerns is almost exclusively done through effective questioning. I recently realized in my own tutoring how often I fall into the same canned set of starting questions. “So, what are you working on today?” “Do you have any concerns with this paragraph?” “How are you feeling about this part?” The wording rarely ever changed, if at all. I started trying to be more open-ended with my wording, but even with this effort, I wondered if I was being as effective with my questions as I could be.

This question about questions lurked in the back of my mind for quite a while until a class I was enrolled in, as if by magic, had an entire lecture dedicated to asking questions. This folklore fieldwork workshop broke down interviewing into types of questions and categories of their use. I immediately started thinking of how I could transition this newfound knowledge into tutoring.

The “semi-structured interview” is the strategy considered to be most effective: a loose pre-planned list of questions that the interviewer intends to use but knows might not all be addressed. With how diverse tutoring is, it’s hard to prepare specific questions beforehand, but knowing a few effective methods of questioning could prove very helpful.

The three types of questions are Open-Ended, Fact-Based, and Follow-Up. They’re divided by how they’re asked and vary widely in the type of answer they’ll most likely receive.

Open-ended questions are questions intended to get a detailed response and encourage the student to think more deeply about the topic (Morales). Part of USU’s tutoring training handbook listed sample open-ended questions. Most of these questions seem to start with “What,” “Why,” or “How,” as prompts for thought.

“What would you say your thesis is?” (Guide 14).

“How could you talk about that quote and relate it to your thesis? (Guide 14).

“What is one connection you see between the two paragraphs?” (Guide 14).

Fact-based questions are, logically, short-answer questions designed to get specific facts (Morales). These are sometimes called close-ended questions, and are

useful for finding due dates, audiences, types/genera of the paper, and any other short-answer.

“Who is the intended audience?”

“What type of essay is this?”

“When is this due?”

Follow-up questions are questions used to clarify or expand on the answer of the previous question (Morales). They’re good for continuing conversations and mining for more information.

“If your audience is other college students, what kind of media do you think they’d get their news from?”

“You said your thesis is how this author’s childhood impacted the subject of their poetry. What do you think was one of the most influential parts?”

“If your thesis is that *Middlemarch* was influenced by *Emma*, what aspects of the stories do you think overlap?”

After learning the types of questions, my class then delved into the purposes of them and broke them down into more uses. They were categorized by purpose rather than type, and mostly fall under fact-based or open-ended.

Grand Tour questions ask for very broad and often generalized statements (Spradley). These are good for getting started and shifting the topic towards addressing new concerns.

“What’s your paper about?”

“What would you say the topic of this paragraph is?”

“What parts of paper-writing do you usually find difficult?”

“How would you summarize your paper in one solid, stand-alone sentence?”
(Guide 14)

Details through questions are used to prompt more details (Spradley). These are often used to ask about routines or processes. These can be useful for finding out writing strategies.

“What’s your usual writing process like?”

“When you’re writing a paper, how do you normally start?”

“When you decide your paper’s topic, what’s the first thing you usually do to start researching it?”

Experience questions, quite logically, ask about experiences (Spradley). These seem most useful for connecting with the student, finding their interest in the subject matter, or for when the paper is about personal experiences.

“How has your day been so far?”

“What made you pick this topic?”

“Could you tell me how you normally write a paper?”

Native-Like questions are intended to have the person being asked use their own wording and expressions (Spradley). These are very important with tutoring, because having the student use their own words is the purpose of them writing.

“How would you say that in your own words?”

“How could you talk about that quote and relate it to your thesis?” (Guide 14).

“How would someone in your field of study say that?”

Leading questions are used to subtly prompt the answer in a specific way (Spradley). We’ve all probably seen this term thrown around in a courtroom drama, but they are very useful for contextualizing the question.

“How do you explain the missing stars from the Apollo [moon-landing] photograph?” (Morales 13).

“If this quote says _____, how does that relate to the thesis?”

“Do you have any problems with finding sources?”

Loaded questions are questions with “assumptive information” (Spradley). This means they require an opinion and make them choose a side, usually for or against. These are usually seen in political interviews, but I think they’re the most important type of question used in tutoring.

“What are your concerns with this paper?”

With new understanding of how to ask questions, I can better frame what I ask to coax a more relevant answer. Unlike the pre-planned interviews for my folklore class, I can’t plan ahead and write out what I want to ask for tutoring sessions. But knowing the basics of how to ask more intentionally can help me tutor better.

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